

Israeli Intelligence Is Out of Control

Leadership Needs to Show It Can Clear Tainted Atmosphere

By ZEV SCHIFF

TEL AVIV—Israel has recently been plunged into two politically and morally disturbing intelligence scandals. One is the case—and the subsequent misleading of the commissions of inquiry investigating the matter—of the two terrorists who seized a bus and its passengers and then were killed by the General Security Services. The other is the Pollard espionage affair.

In both cases the two Israeli intelligence organizations displayed excessive zeal and caused Israel harm. The two cases have something else in common: They led to the discovery that government ministers in Israel have the most negligible control over the intelligence services and that supervision over them is downright deficient. While the repercussions of the General Security Services affair turn mainly inward, the Pollard espionage affair has affected Israel-U.S. relations.

Those who want to water down the gravity of the Pollard affair argue that everybody spies on everybody else—friends included. There's some truth in that argument. But it is not the whole truth. The United States also gathers information, and not just in the Communist bloc or rival countries. There are different ways of obtaining information, not necessarily by satellite. For instance, the United States is known to have tapped the telephones of various heads of state.

But even in the shady war of espionage a number of unwritten ethical rules are strictly adhered to when it comes to friendly countries. The Pollard affair is an example of a gross breach of these ethics. Here Israel has broken the rules of the game when, for an extended period, it used the paid services of an agent to break into American intelligence—an agent who was paid for documents that he had stolen. Jonathan Jay Pollard must have thought that he was helping Israel in its war against terrorism, which was not in conflict with American interests. But had the boot been on the other foot and American intelligence had hired an agent to spy on Israeli intelligence, Israel's reaction would have been just as vehement as was America's.

This espionage network was destined to fail from the start because of the alarmingly amateurish handling of the operation. It was the kind of amateurism that is quite out of character with Israeli intelligence and its reputation for high standards. It can be safely said that had Mossad been involved, no such blunders would have been committed. The excessive self-confidence of Pollard's manipulators and the ambition to succeed at all cost is comprehensible within the context of the rivalry between various Israeli intelligence services as well as personal rivalries. It would otherwise be impossible to explain how LEKEM, or the

Bureau for Science Liaison, collects military information entirely outside its sphere of interest.

What is so difficult to understand is the involvement or non-involvement of the ministerial level in the affair. The official assertion from Jerusalem that the ministers were not involved in the Pollard affair and were not aware of events at any point of the operation must be taken at face value. It is inconceivable that Israel's present leaders would be willing to risk Israel's relations with the United States to such an extent. It is hard to imagine what classified information would be worth risking so much, as well as offering powerful ammunition to Israel's opponents.

How could the politicians have been kept in the dark? This is all the more puzzling, when considering that the official claim of non-involvement is accepted in the United States and in Israel. If information on so delicate an espionage enterprise is not brought to the attention of the senior level, there must be a serious breakdown in the most sensitive reporting channels of the Israeli security system. The feeling is heightened because the Israeli air force commander in chief did not know that a senior officer of his, one with a brilliant military reputation who had been studying in the United States at the time, had become involved in the Pollard espionage affair. It damaged his career and harmed the Israeli air force and its close ties with the U.S. Air Force.

What stands out in addition to the obstruction in Israel's most sensitive channels is the inadequate control over the intelligence services. Had Israel's political echelon not hesitated to ask the right questions, it would have saved Israeli intelligence and the state of Israel one of its most serious fiascos. The affair has harmed Israel, and its government has expressed the deepest regret. Israel has to play a clean and sincere role toward its friends and to come forward with all the available information in order to clear the atmosphere. Israel now hopes that the painful affair, which has taught it a lesson, will not disrupt the deep friendship between the two countries.

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